

Eavesdropping Probed in Md.

Bugs? In the Car Business?

3/19/74
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Federal investigators in Maryland are checking on what they believe to be the "common practice" by car dealers of electronically eavesdropping on the private conversations of customers to gain a bargaining advantage.

The Baltimore office of the FBI and the U.S. attorney for Maryland have in recent weeks seized eavesdropping equipment from two Baltimore car dealers as part of the investigations.

"It is apparently a fairly common practice within the industry," said James E. Anderson, an assistant U.S. attorney for Maryland.

Maurice J. Murphy, executive vice president of the Automotive Trade Association for the National Capital area, said he did not think such eavesdropping was going on and that he never heard of the practice.

Anderson said, he believes the equipment is used to overhear customers discussing terms among themselves after they have been left alone in a room at a dealership.

For example, he said, a customer and his spouse may be discussing "whatever price they've gotten some where else, or how they like the salesman."

The salesman, he said, "can then come

backs and rebut" the customers who are unaware of the eavesdropping.

At the two Baltimore dealerships, Fox Chevrolet and Thompson Lincoln-Mercury, FBI agents recovered eavesdropping devices that had been concealed in vents, Anderson said. He said he is still assessing the evidence and no charges have been brought.

Such eavesdropping, he said, is a violation of federal law.

The equipment, he said, "wasn't like you've seen on 'Mission Impossible' or a tiny bug in an olive in a martini."

The systems used "can be purchased anywhere." They are comparable to home intercom devices, or school public address systems that allow two-way communications, Anderson said.

Some are used for music or for managers to hear a salesman's sales techniques, he said.

Anderson would not say whether further raids are planned. He said investigators were alerted to the practice by "citizens' complaints." The devices sometimes are easily visible if the customer looks in the right place, he said.

In the case of Fox Chevrolet, agents secured their search warrant based on information provided by a former employee who told them of the alleged eavesdropping.